

# Choosing an Epistemic Stance

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses issues connected with methodological choices. There is a need to be clear about the stance at which the knowledge is generated from. The existence of various domains for mapping knowledge and the concept of "methodological sophistication" will also be addressed. The connection of what we claim to know (ontology) and how do we claim to know (epistemology) will be addressed in this paper. Some mapping tools will be used to make understanding more easy. It should be understood that making a choice of a certain epistemic stance is not the end of the journey. The critical aspect is to justify why we make a particular choice and exclude others. There is no practical justification of belonging to more than one domain, neither should we fight once we belong to different domains. At the end, the title of a research project, which I am expecting to do, will be given followed by an indicative bibliography.

## INTRODUCTION

In research work, it is becoming increasingly important for researchers to understand that there exist various options to locate their research knowledge. More importantly, there is need to know "what" is known and "how" is it known. The researcher should be able to address these two fundamental questions consistently. However, before even making the choice it is vital to recognize that there are choices to be made. The worst choice is "to choose not to choose." This may lead to a serious misunderstanding and confusion. The research work may then be like just a game of chance, without any consistence.

## ONTOLOGY VSEPISTEMOLOGY

### Ontology

This is the knowledge about what we claim to know.

### Epistemology

This is a combination of two greek words: 'episteme' which means "knowledge" or "science" and 'logos' which means "knowledge" or "theory." Therefore, Epistemology is concerned with the study of theory of knowledge.

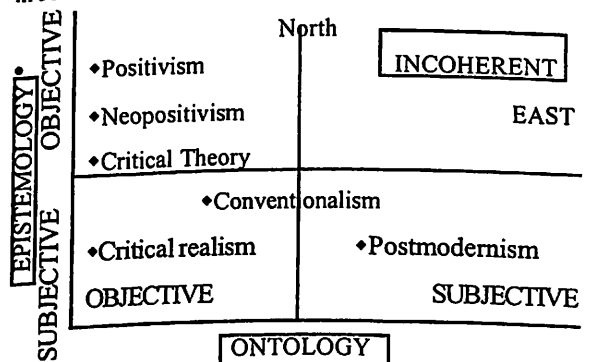
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In other words, this deals with justification about the claimed knowledge.

In line with the above discussion, we can therefore say, ontology answers "what" while epistemology addresses "how." These two must be married together to obtain an epistemic domain. Johnson and Duberley (2000), Figure 8, page 180, gave a good illustrative map about these dimensions. They expressed each in two perspectives; objective or subjective. Having two dimensions in two perspectives, resulted into four possible domains of knowledge mapping. The four quadrants are named as:

- South-East (Postmodernism)
- North-East (Incoherent)
- North-West (positivism)
- South-West (Interpretive/hermeneutic)

**Justification of Choice** (This is based on Figure 8.1 in Johnson and Duberley (2000).



Possible characteristics of each quadrant:

#### SOUTH-EAST

- ♦ Subjectivist ontology, subjectivist epistemology;
- ♦ Locates postmodernists and more of conventionalist;
- ♦ Based on the denial of theory-neutral observational language;
- ♦ Notions of truth and objectivity are merely the outcomes of prestigious discursive practice;
- ♦ Focuses on multiple reality;
- ♦ If there is no external independent ontological referent, epistemic reflexivity becomes an autopoietic (i.e self-generating) process within a recursively closed cognitive system.

#### NORTH-EAST

- ♦ Subjectivist ontology, objectivist epistemology
- ♦ Difficult to make sense out of it
- ♦ Incoherent

#### NORTH-WEST

- ♦ Objectivist ontology, objectivist epistemology;
- ♦ Sensory experience of the objects of reality provides the only secure foundation for social scientific knowledge;
- ♦ Observers can picture an a priori external world objectively and thereby deductively test or, inductively generate theory. Therefore, theory-neutral language is the case;
- ♦ The truth is to be found in the observer's passive registration of the facts that constitute reality;
- ♦ 'Taken-for-granted' is acceptable;
- ♦ Facts must be measurable, and anything out of that is 'not a fact' but abstract.

#### SOUTH-WEST

- ♦ Objectivist ontology, subjectivist epistemology;
- ♦ Interaction is considered to be the best way of making an understanding. Avoid 'taken-for-granted';

- ♦ Theory-laden and not theory-neutral language is the way forward;
- ♦ Knowledge can not and should not be the outcome of the privileged access and dissemination by the authoritative few, rather legitimate knowledge must be the outcome of unconstrained public debate and agreement;
- ♦ Negotiable and democratic co-construction of meaning;
- ♦ Avoid systematic distortion of communication by careful management of power asymmetry and domination; and
- ♦ Identify and involve all potential communicants (strategic talk).

The above four domains give an ability to find the location of the knowledge you claim to know. Burrell and Morgan, 1989, referred these domains as paradigms. The names used are so mehow different but with similar emphasis. In either cases (domains or paradigms), there is no chance to exist in more than one position at the same time. Your existence in one domain denies your existence in others at that very particular time, with the same concept of knowledge. In fact, these domains are incommensurable. However, it is more important to know that, each domain serves its purpose when used correctly and timely. This being the case, there is no reason and there should be no one reason, for occupants of different domains to conflict since they are moving on different directions. Positivists and interpretivists seem to have a cold war between them especially when arguing of the epistemic perspective. However, this is a naive way of reasoning, from the knowledge management point of view.

#### ILLUSTRATION

If we consider these two domains (North-West and South-West) like a lion and an elephant in the forest, they are all masters of the forest depending on time and position. Interestingly one is a carnivore (Lion) while the other one (Elephant) is a herbivore. Though they are all

big animals in the forest, they have different ways of viewing things. For an elephant, a carcass of a zebra for instance, means nothing whereas for a lion that is the best during its lunch time.

### Stances

Having different domains, there still exist sub-domains within the domains. These are referred as stances. This keeps on appreciating the need to make a choice in that even within the same domain we still have an opportunity to make further choices to suite the knowledge mapping. In our day-to-day life we make hundreds if not thousands of choices in a particular hour of the day. In the North-East quadrant for instance, there are positivism and neo-positivism stances. In the South-West quadrant, there are critical theory, critical realism, and pragmatism stances.

### Choice

In most cases there is always a tension whether to take the positivistic route or interpretative (hermeneutic). However, there is a significant need to make a choice. It is not possible at all to use positivistic and hermeneutic domains at the same time. Moreover it is wrong to apply one in place of the other. This is illustrated by Laing (1967) who points out the error of blindly following the approach of the natural sciences in the study of the social world.

... the error fundamentally is the failure to realise that there is an ontological discontinuity between human beings and it-beings. Persons are distinguished from things in that, persons experience the world, whereas things behave in the world (Laing, 1967: 53).

### Choice Making Analysis

From Jones, P., *Studying Society*, 1993 the following is noted about relativists:

... scientific knowledge is not powerful because it is true, but it is true just because it is powerful'. This

is a challenge to indicate that, scientific knowledge is dominatory and using force instead of the truth. So the question is not 'what' is true? but 'how did this version of what is true come to dominate in these social circumstances?

### What is Realism?

This is an anti-positivistic philosophy which claims that, there is no form of science which relies exclusively on empirical evidence. It suggests that there is always something beneath the surface of what is capable of being experienced. From Gill and Johnsons (1996: 178), *Research Methods for Managers* the following is noted about realism: it is divided into two branches of *ontological (metaphysical) realism* in that reality exists independently of cognitive structures of observers and *epistemological realism* in the sense that reality is cognitively accessible to observers.

Much of realism entails both views hence is called 'objectivism,' i.e there is a real 'social' and 'natural' world existing independently of our cognitions which we can neutrally apprehend through observation.

However, other realists would claim that while reality does exist independently of our efforts to understand it, it is not cognitively accessible in a neutral manner. In other words, they accept metaphysical realism but insist that it should be combined with epistemological realism which denies the concept of 'theory-neutral' observational language. It is therefore important to understand the following terms:

- a) Theory-neutral observation language is the concept which claims that, it is possible to test precisely a theory through observation of empirical reality which is readily open to neutral inspection by the observer.
- b) Theory-laden is a concept which explains that the prior values, knowledge and theories of an observer influence what he or she sees during observation.

From: Karsler, D. (1988: 176-178) *Max Weber: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, the following is noted:

- ♦ The interpretive understanding of 'social action' being the object domain of Weber's sociology leads to an investigation into the determining effects of meaning (sin- Verstehen). Its methodological procedure cannot be separated from a causal analytical procedure. Moreover Weber makes explicit an internal connection between the two heuristic strategies.
- ♦ The concept of *socially constructed meaning* is one of Weber's basic conceptions.
- ♦ Weber is always concerned to present meaning as being communicable. However, communicability is always already social and intersubjective and is expressed in changeable, symbolic form.

In Weber's work, three variations of meaning are distinguished as follows (pp. 178):

- i) Meaning as cultural significance, i.e. as 'objectified' meaning in a 'world of meanings'
- ii) Meaning as subjectively intended meaning, which is intersubjectively comprehensible and communicable.
- iii) Meaning as functional meaning which is influenced by objective contexts, is intersubjectively mediated and is of a functional significance for social process of change.

### Ten Key Questions for 'Methodological Sophistication'

Before choosing a domain as well as a stance there is a need to address clearly and carefully the following ten questions. By answering these ten questions precisely, you will end up with a good position hence become 'methodologically sophisticated.'

1. Which phenomenon are you going to study?
2. Where are you going to do your research?
3. Why are you doing it?
4. What is your schedule of doing it?

5. Which resources are needed?
6. Who is to supervise and who is likely to be your audience?
7. Which epistemic domain to belong?
8. Which methods and techniques to be applied?
9. What size to write and how?
10. What will it contribute to the body of knowledge?

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

How can a relational strategy contribute to service competition in two categories of higher learning institutions in a developing country? It is quite clear that this topic deals with a social phenomenon within animates. It is not going to deal with non-living things. Non-living things will be considered as facilities which are to be managed and controlled by the animates. Therefore, the relationship in question is in connection to the human beings.

### Choice

I have decided to choose the South-west quadrant, which entails objectivity ontology and subjectivity epistemology. In this domain there are three sub-domains namely: critical theory; critical realism and pragmatism. I will put forward a brief discussion of each before making another choice within these sub-domains of this hermeneutic approach.

### Critical Theory

This focuses upon the inherent connection between politics, values and knowledge and, thereby, provokes deeper consideration of the politics and values which underpin and legitimise authority of "scientific" knowledge (Alvesson and Willmot, 1988, in Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 115]

### Critical Realism

This is the belief in reality that exists objectively and is revealed through representational devices.

It is unlike many popular characterisations of realism, since its adherents aim to be both anti-positivist and anti-relativist at once. Critical realists consider that the observable behaviour of people and objects ('appearances') is not applicable unless located in the causal context of non-empirical structures, or intrinsic natures ('essences') and their interactions.

### **Pragmatism:**

It originates from the greek word *pragma* which means 'action'. This is the philosophy of meaning which holds that, the meaning of the theory is contained in the practical effects of adopting it. So while the truth may well be 'out there' we may never know it in an absolute sense, because we lack the necessary cognitive and linguistic means of apprehending it.

Although the nature of objects and processes does not uniquely determine the content of human knowledge, it does determine their cognitive and practical possibilities for us (Sayer, 1992: 69-70)

### **Pragmatic-critical Realism**

Having explained the meaning of 'critical realism' and 'pragmatism', it is therefore possible to consider how they have been tacitly combined to provide a distinctive epistemological position. This position is called 'pragmatic-critical realism'. This is a synthesis which attempts to transcend positivism's thesis of foundational-absolute stance and postmodernism's antithesis of chaotic relativism (Harvey, 1989: 52).

### **My Stance**

After carefully considering the applicability of each sub-domain of hermeneutic domain, I have decided to choose the synthesis of critical realism with pragmatism, hence 'pragmatic critical realism'. The main reason to opt for this is the fact that I believe in the concept that the meaning ought to be co-constructed in the course of adopting the theory. The diagram overleaf shows

the position of the choice made denying other stances. I do not mean other positions are useless, only that there is no way you can drive on both sides of the road in the same car at the same time.

### **CONCLUSION**

In any research work, either a commissioned project or an academic research project, there is always a need to do the knowledge mapping from the very beginning. It happens that most of the researchers start in the *ad hoc* basis and look for the place to squeeze their results at the end of the research work. *Interalia*, this leads to inconsistency of the warranted knowledge as well as confusion to the researcher himself. It is therefore crucial to understand the existence of various choices and stances and make a choice within the choices and not outside the choices. My research work focuses on social phenomena, looking at the contribution of relationships to service competition. It is hoped that at the end of this research work, some recommendations will be given about the attainment of competitive advantage through communication as a social process. This research work will be centred at the higher learning institutions in a developing country. I have chosen the hermeneutic domain, with the stance of 'pragmatic-critical realism'. This study is scheduled to last three years from October 2000.

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